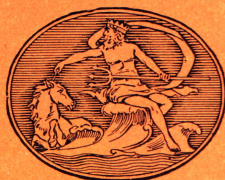


# THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

SEPTEMBER



1929

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Long before this the leak in the bottom of the pot has ceased — stopped not by more pressure, but by less. Ten minutes more, and the excitement will be over.

And then a ferocious hiss fills the shop. I jump away from the mould, imagining that a hidden well of sap has discovered itself in the grain of the wood. But the hiss is not there. The man at the blowtorch suspects the pressure tank, and quickly shuts the valve. The torch goes out, but still the hiss continues. Fearsomely I look at the pot, big, angry, trembling in the heat waves arising from it. What new fiendishness does it contemplate? Is it preparing to blow up with very rage?

Pinaud shouts, and we scatter like chaff as we comprehend his words: 'Automatic sprinkler!'

As a precaution against freezing, there is only air in the pipes, but soon

water will follow the air, sprinkling into the boiling pot, covering the molten keel. We scatter still wider, we who do not know the ways of the shop, and anxiously watch the sprinkler valve. The ceiling above it darkens in the blast of the escaping air. At any instant now water will shower down and the lead will geyser up to meet it.

But Sid comes, panting. At the first hiss he was off, unnoticed, the devil behind him. 'It's all right,' he gasps. 'I've shut off the water.'

So the keel came into being. Cool, firm, dependable, it has been bolted to the bottom of my boat. When the wind presses against my sails, its tremendous weight will keep me from capsizing. Honorable offspring of a malignant mother, born in emotion, wild confusion, and wintry tempest, it is proof against the extravagant ravings of a summer squall.

## THE VOYAGE OF THE LUKA TO PALMYRA ISLAND

BY JOSEPH F. ROCK

### I

JUST north of the equator, about one thousand miles southeast of Hawaii, lies a mysterious uninhabited group of islets known as Palmyra. The exact location is north latitude  $5^{\circ} 49' 04''$  and west longitude  $162^{\circ} 11' 29''$ .

I frankly asked the Honorable Judge C—— of Honolulu what made him buy these islands long before he had ever seen them. He answered that he had always wanted to possess a yacht and a place to go. The yacht proved to be the

twenty-seven-year-old schooner *Luka*. The *Luka*, a seventy-ton and seventy-foot boat, with lines which did not give away her age, had nevertheless seen hard service and ill treatment. She was bought by the honorable judge just as she lay against the wharf, with her seams filled with cement and her larder full of provisions of dubious age, as we were soon to learn to our sorrow. The crew was certainly cosmopolitan. The captain, a German sea hawk, made it plain to me that there was not the slightest distinction between him and



the captain of the *Mauretania*, for a captain was a captain no matter what type of boat he commanded. Three Hawaiian sailor boys, two Tahitians, — one a mate, the other a cook, — and an Englishman who had charge of an obstreperous gasoline engine, which had hastily been installed to help us through the doldrums, completed the roster.

Amid cheers and the snapping of cameras in the hands of newspaper reporters and the detonations of the mufflerless gasoline engine of our boat, we slowly moved out of the harbor. A fresh breeze caught and filled the sails, and on we sped on our venture. Time lay limitless ahead of us like the great expanse of waters, as none could tell when we were to sight the shores of Palmyra Island.

On the hatch of the *Luka* there was fastened a large square iron tank, containing precious drinking water, but, like everything else on board the boat, the tank had claim to age. The second day out of Honolulu we found to our consternation that the tank was empty. The island of Palmyra was without fresh water, as the highest point from which to view the sunset was five feet above sea level — hence no wells and no fresh-water ponds. To proceed without fresh water was next to foolhardy, for all we had on board was two demijohns of distilled water for ourselves, the crew living on the milky drippings of the ice, of which we had two thousand pounds. This, however, lasted only until we reached the island. But we heard a voice saying, 'O ye of little faith,' and sped on to our waterless destination. I lived on oranges, which Dr. C——, the conchologist of the party, kindly had provided. They were meat and drink to me, since I had no desire to partake of the cook's abominable concoctions. In his favor it may be said that he had little to cook with,

and such as was at his disposal hailed from long-bygone days. The rice was pink from mildew, and the flour a lively mass of squirming maggots.

The sixth day out we reached the doldrums, dreaded by all sailing vessels, for it is here that one can lie becalmed for weeks and even months. The English engineer — who up to now had spent his time repairing the old engine, which gave off vile odors, permeating our only cabin where we slept and ate our meals — was able, after much cranking, to get the engine going. The exhaust was without a muffler, and conversation was out of the question. With looks and gestures we made ourselves understood, like mutes of a deaf-and-dumb asylum. To judge from its noise, our engine might have been driving us at a speed of fifty miles an hour, but the log hung straight into the sea and our ship moved inchwise over the expanse of waters.

The question now arose in which direction Palmyra lay, for according to one map we should have been there; according to another we should have passed it, and according to a third we were still miles off. Both the captain and the judge were busy with the sextant, taking the sun, but each managed to calculate a different latitude and longitude. I suggested that we watch the sea birds and follow their direction, for certainly if anyone could find Palmyra it was the boobies (*Sula piscator*) who lived in large colonies on the islets. Huge flocks of birds, when evening came, flew in one direction, and the *Luka*, taking their hint, followed. Kioki, our Tahitian mate, who had sat for hours upon the mast, yelled down at 4 P.M. one day that there was land ahead. It recalled the discoveries of Columbus. We thanked the birds for our delivery. We lay to all night, as it was too late to make the island that evening.

## II

Palmyra or Samarang Island was discovered by Captain Sawle of the American vessel *Palmyra* on November 7, 1802, and named by him after his vessel. The island group, which is in reality a coral atoll, consists of fifty-two islets, surrounding, in the shape of a horseshoe, three large lagoons of considerable depth. The largest islet contains forty-six acres, while the smallest is a mere dot of forty-seven hundredths of an acre. The atoll has a varied history, and, although an insignificant spot, three nations have planted their flags upon it. Palmyra was first attached by the United States on October 19, 1859, and later by the Hawaiian Government for King Kamehameha IV, and his successors to the throne, on April 15, 1862, and again later by Commander Nichols of H. B. M. S. *Cormorant* in the year 1889, for the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, and so forth. The island became United States territory once more when the Hawaiian Islands were annexed, and Palmyra was especially mentioned in the President's message to Congress, December 16, 1898, transmitting the report of the Hawaiian Commission, in which the names of all the islands, including Palmyra, were given.

The island, or islet, has been owned by various persons, but as it is not of commercial importance it was left to nature and a few bird poachers who paid occasional visits to its shores. Such was the condition of the atoll when Judge C—— acquired it from a lady in Australia, who had inherited it from her husband, a former resident of Hawaii.

## III

Early in the morning, looking for an anchorage, we cruised about in the

pellucid water, which permitted us to see too plainly the many dangers which threatened our old schooner, and incidentally ourselves. Blocks of coral, multicolored and variously shaped, came dangerously close to the surface of the ocean, encircling the palm-fringed shore like a garland wreath. Never shall I forget that glorious morning, as we passed one of the islets, a wall of solid green down to the water's edge, a mass of trees — nearly eighty feet in height — festooned with a curtain of white morning-glories. We dropped anchor not too soon in eight fathoms of water some two miles offshore.

Our clumsy sailors launched the skiff, and off we rowed toward the mysterious islets. No landscape gardener could have possibly arranged their verdure more skillfully; like huge bouquets they lay before us, floating on an ocean of the purest blue. I gave a sigh of relief when I left the *Luka*, with its growling captain, and a sense of freedom filled my soul as we approached the mysterious shore.

Peacefully our skiff glided over the tranquil waters, revealing life of undreamed shapes and gaudy brilliance. Varicolored fishlike tropical butterflies flitted in and out between columns of coral which reached the surface of the waters and bade us halt. We stepped out of the skiff on to veritable tables of coral, covered with just an inch of water. These tables, rising from the ocean floor, seemed a hundred feet or more beneath the skiff, and they formed a forest of gigantic mushrooms on whose heads we walked to shore, nearly a mile distant, stepping over yawning chasms whose shades of blue ranged from the lightest azure to deep ultramarine. A strip of pure white sand, over which the gentle waves rolled black and red holothurians or sea cucumbers, lay between the ocean and dense forests.

The islet on whose fringe we stood we gave the name of 'Home Islet,' for it served as such during our stay of sixteen days. We looked about first for a possible place to pitch a tent, and found a narrow cove facing the reef-bound shore, over which roared the foaming, thundering ocean surf, like a wild monster jealously disputing the little space the islands had conquered from the great expanse of waters. We were greeted by large white birds called boobies, which nested in the *Tournefortias*, giant heliotropes with fragrant white flowers and silky silvery leaves, bathing their branches in the balmy crystal sea. The boobies never stirred, but curiously surveyed the new intruders. Unmoved, they sat like birds of clay or decoys, for at least their generation knew not that 'only man is vile.' Beyond the *Tournefortias* rose huge trees of softest wood, with roots that stretched in most fantastic forms, like squirming dragons, over a soilless ground, composed of sand mixed with guano and loose coral clinkers. The underbrush consisted of pure stands of bird's-nest ferns (*Asplenium nidus*), so dense that progress was only possible by throwing one's self backward into the dense mass of spore-covered foliage, which reached over one's head. Jumping spiders inhabited this jungle. They spun no web, but pounced upon their prey of tiny moths. Since the width of the islet was only a few hundred yards, one soon emerged, covered from head to foot with the brown spores of the ferns, on the other shore, which faced large lagoons and sand spits.

The most interesting inhabitant of these sombre forests was a bird the size of a small pigeon, but more slender, its plumage of the purest white, its bill and eyes of deepest black. It always flies in pairs, and hence has acquired the name of love bird (*Gygis alba*). It builds no nest, but lays its eggs upon

naked branches often smaller than the eggs themselves. These balanced eggs were numerous throughout the forest. Occasionally we found them hatched, and no more pathetic scene can be imagined than a tiny naked bird upon a naked branch. It would squat motionless and sad, taking a first lesson in personal demonstration of the theory of gravitation. The parents flew occasionally about one's head to distract attention from the curiously balanced young. One day I wanted to photograph a peculiar tree trunk, but had to give it up, as the bird who had her young upon the tree objected. It was impossible to drive her from the lens with sticks and coral clinkers, and no manner of shouting and waving made her leave the space between the lens and the tree trunk.

#### IV

Never shall I forget our first walk along the beach and across the narrow channel which separated our islet from the next. It was fairly hot, so close to the equator, and, not expecting to meet with strangers, we donned Adam's costume and sallied forth. Our only covering was an umbrella, to protect us from the birds, which fairly obscured the sky. Conversation was next to impossible, as they kept up a pandemonium. They flirted all around us, so close to our eyes that we became alarmed; arming ourselves with large branches, we tried in vain to drive them off. Night came on quickly, and with it a silvery moon and cool balmy air. Glorious peace settled over our paradise, and we wondered why man strove to amass wealth and power and elected to inhabit cells and dungeons, within gloomy houses. Here was freedom, health-giving air, simple food furnished by the sea and by the palms. Money was a matter of utter uselessness, and

millions of dollars were so many coral clinkers on that unspoiled land.

We retired to our tent, congratulating ourselves that nothing would disturb our slumber, as there were no mosquitoes, ants, or flies; but we had reckoned without the hermit crabs. About midnight I was awakened by something cold and heavy against my cheek — vampires, I thought, still dreaming. By that time my companion had also stirred and found that we were being investigated by a multitude of crabs which lived in discarded sea shells the size of a man's fist. They were all over our blankets, and filled the tent. We started to evict them, but found to our consternation an unlimited supply of crabs and not an inch of ground visible outside the tent. It was as if the islet were composed of a moving, heaving mass of crabs. To assure a peaceful rest, we resorted to barricading our tent with sheets of corrugated iron we had brought with us as roofing for a house. We surrounded the tent with this iron sheeting, burying part of it in the coral clinkers to prevent the crabs from crawling underneath. We then once more retired. The ingenious crabs adopted tactics such as soldiers do in climbing over a wall, and many of them piled up against the corrugated iron. Thus they kept up a constant attack against our tent, and, although they did not gain entrance, they managed to keep us awake, as they fell with their heavy shells from corrugations which they had laboriously reached.

Morning found our tent surrounded by a wall of crabs. We collected them in gunny bags and dumped them into the sea six fathoms deep outside the reef. But their many relatives were as numerous as the clinkers on the ground. We found them eating everything. They climbed the shrubs and trees and ate the flowers, as well as birds' eggs,

bit the lids of our discarded tins, and enjoyed many new flavors such as onions and potato peelings. They even ate each other. Three or four would pull a victim from his shell and devour him in short order. We feared for our chickens—at least the honorable judge did, as he had intended leaving them behind to multiply, but not with thousands or millions of crabs about, hungry and with no particular predilection as to menus.

On investigating our scant provisions, we found that the crabs had discovered them, and on the ground among the coral clinkers, where we had placed a bag of rice and chicken feed, the crabs had torn the gunny bags to pieces and multitudes of them reveled in the grain.

Naturally we were much concerned regarding drinking water, as none was to be found on all the islets. On Home Islet we discovered a fallen-down old shanty, and in it, as well as outside, stood a row of Oriental jars, three to four feet high and full of water. The water was not potable; it was foul and slimy. The bottoms of the jars were covered thickly with dead lizards. We strained the slimy liquid and boiled it, and what we thus obtained was used for cooking. Fortunately it began to rain the second night and continued to do so nearly every night of our stay. We used the corrugated iron and a few cleaned jars to catch the precious rain water, of which we were sore in need, both for our stay and for our voyage home.

## V

On the larger islets we found pure stands of coconut palms so dense that those on the outermost fringe were forced to lie flat on the sand and rear their fronded heads above the water near the very waves. The nuts lay four feet deep and had germinated,

growing in all directions. Here we met our first coconut crabs, huge monsters known to scientists as *Birgus latro* or robber crabs. It is said of them that they climb the coconut palms and fetch the nuts for food. We never observed such gymnastic feats, but there was no necessity of doing any climbing, as the coconuts lay many deep upon the ground. Their nests consisted, usually, of coconut fibre which they had torn laboriously, fibre by fibre, from the husks. Some of their nests looked as if huge mattresses had been emptied, or resembled an upholstery establishment. They were most easily killed, as they moved slowly backward on approach. A gentle tap upon the head, and they became extinct. Their claws, of which one was always of huge size, helped to vary our menus, which otherwise consisted daily of fish chowder. The meat was sweet, rich, and had a nutty flavor, for the crabs live exclusively on coconuts when not on each other.

For sixteen days we lived a regular Robinson Crusoe existence, and daily we had new experiences. We found, for instance, that we could walk from one islet to the other, the islets being separated by narrow channels only waist deep. To make quicker progress we walked in the shallow water surrounding the islets on the lagoon side. Our splashing steps were taken for the movements of small fish by numerous small sharks which lived in the lagoons. They made straight for us, and one had to be well provided with strong boots, for the sharks would otherwise nibble at one's toes. We often waited for them until they were within reach, and then stepped upon their heads, or, yelling at them, would make them turn and flee. Once nine sharks, each about four feet long, attacked us, and, finding ourselves outnumbered, we made haste to reach the land. We armed ourselves with the

midribs of coconut leaves and, hitting the water right and left as we walked along, kept them at a distance. The sport of fishing in Palmyra was no fun at all, for one could leave five minutes before breakfast and catch the particular fish one had selected from a multitude which always cruised about between the islets in the clear channels and have it fried for breakfast. Mulletts were so thick in the tepid, shallow bays and moved so sluggishly between one's feet that all one had to do was to cover them with the scoop net, pick them up, and put them in a bag. With a large throw net one could have caught thousands in no time.

While I explored the island, the honorable judge built himself a house near our erstwhile camp. The house, consisting of one room, was a great improvement on our tent, especially so as it was crab-proof and stood on high legs; and to allow for ventilation in this hot region a foot-wide space was left between the roof and walls. The creatures inhabiting Palmyra were certainly most fearless, and therefore curious and of an investigating turn of mind. Hardly had we moved in and occupied the house when the birds did likewise. Finding no obstruction beneath the roof, they flocked in in multitudes and made themselves at home. Some flew back and forth across the room, in and out, discovering thereby a new diversion and a new sport on dull Palmyra. Naturally, as the birds were not the size of colibris, but as large as ducks and geese, it was no sport for us, and made us speedily employ the mosquito net to screen the house.

I used to walk about the islet, visiting the boobies and their young, who nested in the trees and bushes overhanging the lagoons. To test their vanity I tickled one, whereupon it gulped and gulped and quickly presented me with five ill-smelling, undigested flying fish,

after which I decided never to tickle them again. It evidently took me for the Palmyra tax collector, or frigate bird. These birds of prey would sit all day upon the coconut palms, but when evening drew nigh they became alert and watched the male boobies flocking home with fish for wife and young; then they would pounce upon the unsuspecting boobies in the air, chastising them with their mighty wings until the poor boobies gave up the fish, which the frigate birds, swooping down, speedily caught in mid-air.

Before leaving Honolulu the honorable judge was commissioned deputy sheriff and empowered to post a proclamation on the island — for whom, it was difficult for me to see. This proclamation, printed in plain judicial English, was nailed to the trunks of coconut palms and ended: 'Trespassers will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.' By whom, after the judge had left Palmyra, was also difficult for me to see, unless the birds and crabs were deputed to prosecute invaders as they did us in the beginning.

## VI

Thus we passed our time, fishing, catching crabs, collecting corals, plants, insects. Upon the sand spits or coral-clinker flats of some of the islets we found the sooty tern (*Sterna fuliginosa*)

in thousands. Each laid one egg in a depression in the sand. These pitted flats were covered by millions of eggs, and one was forced to walk on them, as there was barely any space between. When one walked through a colony, it was interesting to observe the behavior of the terns. They naturally rose and flew about one's head, but when one stood still the birds quickly settled, even those at one's very feet. They would run around to find their eggs, all of which looked perfectly alike, and yet each tern would find her own — at least, so it would seem by the fuss they made.

We loaded the old *Luka* to capacity with coconuts of the largest size, barrels of salted mullets, and one live robber crab which the crew adopted as a mascot and made climb the ship's mast. Alas, it had to die ere we reached Hawaii, for the Territorial immigration law tabooed crabs of that particular description.

What finally happened to Palmyra I have not learned. As far as I know, the crabs and birds are still the sole masters of the island. But once it nearly became the property of a group of Chicago ladies, man-haters, who wanted to retire to this lonely spot in the mid-Pacific; but, had they ever ventured there, I would vouch that they would have turned woman-haters in the end.